AVOCA SCHOOL

MARY FRANCES RIGSBY

Everyone likes "Dreams Come True" stories and I feel very fortunate to tell my own. As a youngster, I had typical little girl dreams of marrying a nice man and raising several children. But before those dreams began, I dreamed of following in my mother's footsteps by becoming a teacher. Not long after I had learned my ABC's, I was already seeing myself helping others learn to read. That dream came true years later in 1939 at Avoca Township School north of Fairbury.

Sadly, I got my first job because my dear mother, Bridget Glennon, had become ill and was retiring. She had been teaching at Avoca for five years. Coincidentally, I had just completed my studies at ISNU with a 2-year teaching certificate and was looking for a job. Even though I was just 19 years old, the local school board hired me to fill the position. I worried all that summer about the big shoes I had to fill; Mom was very well liked and known throughout the countryside as a fine teacher. How could I possibly replace her? With her encouragement, I gradually calmed my nerves and soon began to feel at home in my one-room schoolhouse in front of the 12 or so students who lived in the square mile sections surrounding the school.

Just like in my dream, teaching truly was second nature to me. It also helped enormously that the kids were well behaved, polite, and enjoyed helping one another. When the older children had their own work completed. they often helped the younger ones. They liked to pronounce spelling words, practice math problems on the blackboard, and make up multiplication table flashcards. Given that I had eight grades to oversee, it certainly helped to have my ready and willing "teaching assistants" nearby.

Because we were so few in number, we played softball outside together as well as other games the children liked. And we had lunch together. I particularly remember cold days inside, huddling near the big furnace that served both as our heater and our stove. We often heated soup and other leftovers from our lunch pails on top of the furnace. Those are such warm-hearted memories. When I think of my four years teaching at Avoca, learning together through teamwork, mixed with an overlay of coziness, friendship, and fun, all immediately and fondly come to mind. The goal of providing "positive learning environments" is so often spoken of these days in educational and parenting circles—Avoca School had that and then some.

We had many ways to entertain ourselves. inside and outside the schoolroom, but the most popular were always our long-awaited Christmas programs that all the parents and surrounding neighbors attended. Mrs. Bud Wink, who lived in our district, accompanied the children's Christmas songs and, of course, Santa came for his annual visit. I distinctly remember the year my brother Tom ho-ho-ho'ed his way into the school to delight the children with his rendition of Santa Claus.

One special Avoca memory really sticks out in my mind as symptomatic of how times have changed. It still makes me laugh! One of my youngest students, Harold Hish, lived at the Pumping Station with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Luther Hish, and his little brother, Donald. Three-year-old Donald decided one day to visit Harold at school and rode his tricycle right down the gravel road from their house nearly a mile away. There were times that road could be very busy with trucks and tractors pulling farm implements so I was sure Donald's mother would be frantic once she realized he was nowhere around. I had no telephone in the school with which to call her, Harold seemed too young to be trusted to get his adventurous brother home, and I couldn't leave the other students alone in the schoolhouse. So I did the next best thing. I piled all the students, three-deep, Donald, and the tricycle into my car and away we went to return him to his mothers arms. It's a good thing we didn't have to worry about seat belts or a policeman being anywhere nearby! We returned to school safely and were never visited by young Donald again.

Though very old-fashioned by the standards of schools over the last 60-plus years, Avoca was quite modern in its day and the envy of many students and teachers in surrounding schools. We had inside restrooms—two of them!—and electricity. We even had a radio so we could tune into a popular daily educational program. However, by 1943, a much larger wave of modernization was closing the country schools one by one as school districts consolidated. Avoca's children first went to Lodemia then eventually were bussed to Fairbury to the Isaac Walton School at 4th and Maple: their fellow students from south of Fairbury were bussed to Edison School on the corner of 4th and Oak Street. I wanted to stay closer to home so I took a position for another two years at a little school north of Forrest that hadn't yet closed.

Fast forwarding two decades later—after following my other dream track by getting married to Hartzel Rigsby, having five children, and being a stay-at-home mom—I returned to teaching where my career continued for 25 more years at Fairbury's Westview Elementary School. I also returned to ISU and between night classes and summer school finished the necessary courses to get my Bachelor's Degree.

Today, nothing thrills me more than to hear "Hello, Mrs. Rigsby" on Main Street, in church, or in Dave's Supermarket. I know before I even look around that the voice belongs to one of my students. Their greetings serve to remind me how much I enjoyed teaching and how privileged I was to have each one in my classroom. I'm also grateful that our Avoca School still stands as a reminder of my earliest days in teaching. Though many country schools were torn down, it was sold and eventually remodeled into a home. It's a pleasure to drive by and reminisce about my four years inside those walls.

Finally, just as my mother bestowed her love of teaching on me, I've passed that love on to one of my children. My daughter, Theresa, taught first at Lexington for several years and now teaches third grade in Gainesville, Georgia. She too loves her work and it makes mevery happy that through her, my family's teaching tradition lives on—a tradition in which the Avoca School played such a major role.